

**Ruha Benjamin**, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, Cambridge: Polity, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-509-52639-0 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-509-52640-6 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-509-52643-7 (ebook)

Ruha Benjamin's new book, *Race After Technology*, is powerful and engaging survey of the racialization of emerging digital technologies. Foundationally, her argument is relatively straightforward, that new technologies are not socially neutral, but rather are embedded within and actively entrench existing structures of white supremacy. Complex algorithms and quotidian apps veil these social effects, naturalizing discrimination as simply descriptive statistics. This constitutes what Benjamin calls the New Jim Code: "new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era" (p.5-6).

Critiquing the relationship between emerging digital technologies and race, Benjamin outlines a new interdisciplinary subfield that she terms "race critical code studies". In the Introduction, she characterizes race critical code studies as "defined not just by *what* we study but also by *how* we analyze, questioning our own assumptions about what is deemed high theory versus pop culture, academic versus activist, evidence versus anecdote" (p.45). Where data infrastructures imperialistically present an increasingly total vision, extracting data from all aspects of life, Benjamin pushes against these totalizing narratives and calls instead for "thin description", elastically stretching to engage "fields of thought and action too often disconnected" (p.45). Her analysis pivots from social theory and scholarly studies to tweets and anecdotes, which she describes "as a method for reading surfaces – such as screens and skin" (ibid.). Thus mimicking the ways that social relations are forged in a digital age, she aims to trace "links between individual and institutional, mundane and spectacular, desirable and deadly in a way that

troubles easy distinctions” (p.46). I am sympathetic to her eschewal of the hubris of totalizing technological narratives and refusal to privilege a particular form of knowledge; however, at times, Benjamin’s embrace of the fragile assemblages of fragmentary knowledge obscures the context underpinning the development of new forms of technology. While her analysis powerfully articulates the way that emerging technologies facilitate the surveillance and control of racialized populations, it undertheorizes the structural forces of racial capitalism guiding the development of new digital technologies.

Nevertheless, the central theoretical interventions of *Race After Technology* are both clear and trenchant. On the one hand, Benjamin brings an analysis of race to science and technologies studies. On the other hand, she pushes for recognition of race itself as a form of technology – a human construct “designed to separate, stratify, and sanctify the many forms of injustice experienced by members of racialized groups” (p.36). Benjamin’s analysis pushes science and technology studies discussions of black boxes – things that simultaneously produce records and remain bracketed beyond our understanding – to address anti-Blackness. Thus, Benjamin is able to ferret out how race inheres in technology, even as technology presents itself as beyond race. Her analysis powerfully extends Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s (2003) analysis of color-blind racism, showcasing how systemic racism endures and intensifies as symbolic shifts in an increasingly digitally coded world render racism more difficult to identify.

Through the book, Benjamin demonstrates both an aptitude and fondness for coining new academic catchwords, often effectively building upon and recasting concepts from the scholarly literature. The New Jim Code is, of course, a nod to Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010) – a text that castigated the US carceral system for labelling Black men as criminals to construct a new racial underclass in an age of colorblindness. Benjamin extends this analysis to examine the effects of transcoding

racialised cultural assumptions into the software and algorithms that increasingly govern society. The New Jim Code thus gestures to the way digital codes “operate within powerful systems of meaning that render some things visible, others invisible, and create a vast array of distortions and dangers” (p.7). Similarly, her concept of the anti-Black box inflects discussions of the social production of science – she specifically references Frank Pasquale’s *The Black Box Society* (2015) – to highlight the covert racialization of technology. Similar pithy catchwords encapsulate the central concepts of each the main chapters: engineered inequity, default discrimination, coded exposure, and technological benevolence.

The first chapter addresses the question of engineered inequity, examining the conditions that make robots racist. While one of the putative arguments for automation is escape from human bias, Benjamin demonstrated how tragically naïve it is to believe that racist engineers would build anti-racist robots. Rather, as she painstakingly details, engineers encode their biases into the decision-making processes that computers use and the assumptions that they rely upon. Even machine learning processes ultimately agglomerate the combined biases of all the people from whom they collect data. Thus, within a society structured by domination, machines continue to reproduce relations of white supremacy.

Chapter two shifts to examine the implicit bias of technologies that arise from tech developers’ failure to account for social structures of privilege and penalty. Here Benjamin advances a method for reading technological glitches not as accidents but as opportunities to interrogate the logic of the overall system. She very poignantly opens the chapter quoting a tweet from @alliebland: “Then Google Maps was like, ‘turn right on Malcolm Ten Boulevard’ and I knew there were no black engineers working there” (p.78). Rather than dismissing this glitch, she uses it to argue that the normal settings of algorithms necessarily reproduce default discrimination. Pulling this argument forward,

she compellingly explores how predictive policing algorithms and automated parole risk assessments reproduce racial inequities. While these programs do not explicitly rely on race, within a segregated society neighborhoods serve to identify populations and operate as a proxy for race, making Black neighborhood residents targets for surveillance and apprehension.

The third chapter addresses what Benjamin refers to as coded exposure. Here she extends the discussion of surveillance, specifically addressing different forms of racial visibility and invisibility. Building on the long history of photographic technologies normalizing whiteness in their default settings, Benjamin demonstrates how engineering assumptions about the normal spectrum of human appearances shape how facial recognition software operates. Thus, the inability of Zoom to recognize Black faces reflects and reproduces a long history of seeing Blackness as other-than-human. Moreover, facial recognition software attuned to subtle differences in white faces often misrecognizes Black faces. Much as Black men are liable to be detained by racist human police officers for “matching the suspect description”, automated cameras also misidentify Black faces as possible criminal suspects.

Chapter four explores technological benevolence and how products and services targeted for particular populations inadvertently reproduce social biases. In this chapter, Benjamin engages the multiple meanings of racial fixes, offering repair but often holding inequalities in place or even creating new methods to fix the system in the interests of the already privileged. For instance, she critiques that new surveillance technologies that create alternatives to incarceration are not liberatory but a novel apparatus of containment and exploitation, where “those wearing the shackle must pay for their containment” (p.137). Similarly, she argues that although modes of micro-targeting advertisements to particular populations seem appealing, presenting people with messages ethnically suited

to them is not empowering. Rather, these practices commodify cultural diversity for the further enrichment of the elite.

Benjamin situates the final chapter as a counter narrative that showcases how people are working to resist and build alternatives to the New Jim Code. The title, “Retooling Solidarity, Reimagining Justice”, gestures to alternative trajectories for technological development and deployment. For instance, Benjamin discusses an app that allows people to contribute bail funds to Black people in custody. However, the bulk of the chapter emphasizes how people are organizing against the new digital racial code. Here she stresses the power of narrative to disrupt the flow of algorithms and posit an alternative vision of justice. Leaning into narratives of alternative Black futurity, she highlights the role that Black speculative fiction can play in imagining our world otherwise. Although I am sympathetic to the call to aesthetic politics, I nonetheless wonder whether she understates the extent to which people are also using technology to contest injustice.

One of the ways that future scholarship could extend analysis beyond *Race After Technology* would be to further consider the relationship between technology and struggles for racial justice. Building upon Benjamin, work on race and emerging technology could be tied to the long discussion of the relationship between race and industrial environmental harms. The literature on environmental justice not only attests to the long lineage of polluting industries disregarding the impacts development will have on Black life, but also highlights some of the ways that historically marginalized communities have appropriated technologies to document their conditions of life and challenge systems of racial and environmental injustice. For instance, the Louisiana Bucket Brigade used low cost community sampling by volunteers to collect air pollution data neglected by government authorities. With emerging technologies, activists are

currently exploring opportunities to refine or improve these citizen science initiatives (Ottinger 2013).

Benjamin's account was most powerful when interrogating the complicity of emerging technologies in the extension of surveillance and carceral apparatuses over Black life, but weakest in its analysis of the economic forces that drive these developments. She regularly notes that emerging tech is more likely to benefit investors than Black community members. However, the particular ways in which racial capitalism interpellates technology needs to be further elucidated. Scholars have developed potent critiques of the political economy of platform and surveillance capitalism (Srnicek 2016; Zuboff 2019). However, the racialization of platform and surveillance capitalism needs to be further theorized, and *Race After Technology*'s occasional gestures to the dynamics of racial capitalism only accentuate the need to extend such work.

Ultimately, Benjamin's book is a powerful injunction against the technological hubris of the contemporary moment, as new technologies reform the way people relate to one another and the earth. Her book sits alongside an increasing catalog of studies exposing the dangers of new surveillance and algorithmic apparatuses, such as Simone Browne's *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015) and Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018). Powerful yet accessible, I found myself constantly thinking *Race After Technology* would be an ideal text to teach students about issues of technology and race. But it is more than a teaching resource; it is the foundation for an expanded, critical conversation about the meaning of technology in society that desperately calls for greater attention both academic and activist.

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